

Content Warning: Sexual violence

RIPE AND ROT

She was a peach the first time you slept together. Her arms and legs were fuzzy, sunsets staining her skin and her outer layer didn't taste like anything but sweat and daylight, so you pinched at her lower back skin, pulled gently and her dermis began to move with your draw; you pulled harder, bent elbow more, yanked further until skin slid off of muscles and bones and her warm, peachy flesh was left hanging. You pushed on where her sternum should be with an index finger, then with a middle finger, then with both and hit something hard like a pit (heart); plunged into her juicy chest (splatter) and pulled out that beating pit, sucked on the edges to get the remaining guts off. It was your prize; it was your symbol of championship; it was yours. But she took it back, shoved it back into place, slipped her skin back on, and kissed your cheek. She put her rollerblades back on, grinned, and said *do you like my perfume? It's peach* and you only nodded because you didn't want her pulp to cascade from your mouth.

Your wife didn't smell like that; she smelled like the tiles in your kitchen, like spilled spaghetti sauce and mud that flaked off of the dog's paws after running in the yard during a storm; no, she actually smelled like stale lavender perfume, like department store clothes washed in pungent detergents, like burning hair from straightening every morning. You must have smelled like bar floors and vodka and microwaved meals after working the late-shift. You had never given thought to how you'd taste, only knowing sweat and the washing soap that your wife cleaned your black t-shirts with.

You usually went out for a smoke three or four or maybe ten times a shift at the bar depending on the day. It was a Wednesday in June when you saw her, the sun setting over the mountains, the orange glow blocked by big buildings. You first noticed her rollerblades, which had red wheels, little worn out wheels, and they had red laces, too. The rest was black leather and thick tube socks; they peeked out from the top as she glided on the sidewalks, rolling in denim shorts and a tucked-in t-shirt. Your gaze moved up until you finally saw her face: tan (burnt), constellated freckles (or maybe big pores), curly locks of brown hair (messy), and light green eyes (captivating). She saw you, glanced at the cigarette in your hand, gave a smirk, spun around in a circle just once, and then skated back into the setting sun with her friends. She came back the day after, without the rollerblades this time and you were shaking and pouring drinks behind the bar when she approached. She slipped you her ID; it was clearly fake and her face told you that she was seventeen or maybe nineteen but surely not twenty-one and her eyes told you to believe that piece of plastic, they were so real (the eyes) and you shouldn't have, but you slid the ID back to her on the wooden bar top and smiled. *A shot of vodka* she said. You poured it, dubious that her young throat could handle it but she downed it as if it were water or fruit juice. The sparkle she exhibited reminded you of the first time your mother let you taste champagne: 15 years old, a cold New Years Eve and she was red-lipped and smiling, glanced at you during the party at the house; she held her hands behind her back as she approached you and revealed a flute half full of golden liquid; *don't tell your father*, she winked at you and you drank it. You didn't tell him and you wouldn't tell on this girl sitting at the bar, either.

When you entered her in your beaten-up red sedan, she tasted of strawberries; not the pulverized ones you put in fruity drinks, but fresh off the vine, ripe and red and seedy. You didn't let her shimmy off of your lap because it felt too good, such ecstasy and existential inhale and release, such shiny succulence that you never wanted to pick her from the vine. Her face was turning pink, then darker, darker, darker until her cheeks and forehead and eyelids were bright red and you grazed your thumb on her plump lips and she opened them for you. As she sucked your finger, you pushed deeper and deeper and deeper; as you pushed further, small seeds began to pop out of her pores and fall onto your chest but it didn't hurt her to become this seedy berry. In fact, she took one last heave of ecstasy, swung her strawberry face backward in pleasure, and then the fallen seeds floated back into her pores, filling her visage until she was a person again (reborn). Before she left, she took out a tube of glittery pink lip gloss and reapplied it to her lips. The manufactured scent of strawberries wafted around the backseat of your car and she said *did you know that strawberries aren't actually berries at all? They're part of the rose family* and she chuckled, shook her wild hair out, and rollerbladed away under the harsh streetlights.

On the first day of July, you told your wife that you had the late shift, but you had actually made plans to drive to your favorite spot just outside of town. You used to take your wife to this clearing near the creek; it was near your childhood home, close enough to walk but far enough to get away from the overwhelming stares of the moss that draped along the side of the wooden pillars that kept the house alive. When you were teenagers, you'd sneak your wife into your room, have her climb up the creaky porch, and slide into your bedroom window while the sun set. Your mother never heard, never confronted you about it, never barged in as your wife slipped

off her light-wash jeans before you made quiet love to her. After you finished, you'd take her to the creek and smoke cigarettes as you tried to catch crawdads with dirty fingers.

She left her rollerblades at home, opting for worn-out, dirty white high-tops instead. She hopped into your car parked at the bar; on your way towards the wildlife and away from the city lights, she turned the volume all the way up and stuck her head and torso out of the passenger side window; her curls flowed like hair does in the wind, only more lush and free. She screamed at the setting sun without anger or hurt, but with a savage kind of youth and ease. You took her to the creek near where you grew up, but you didn't look for your childhood home in the distance. Instead, you locked fingers with her and descended towards the running water. There was a large fallen branch connecting the sandy banks and she hopped on the branch and shimmied her way to the middle, lifted her arms up (fists closed), and screamed again (wild). Her shoes got soaked, so she shook them off of her feet.

Sometimes your mother and father would insist on Sunday picnics, checkerboard cloth and icebox and all, at the clearing near the creek. So, the three of you would walk from the house during the dripping afternoon, find a grassy spot to settle on, and ate fresh vienna sausages, crackers with brie and raspberry jam or apple butter. She always wore a flowing dress. He always wore a button down. They looked at each other sometimes, thinking I wouldn't catch the glinted glance. But I would, and they'd grin at each other because they knew each other so fully, so innocently. My father would usually throw off his shoes, roll up his pant legs, and wade in the shallowest bits of the creek. My mother and I would stay back, watch him; once, I had a smudge

of raspberry on my cheek next to the crease of my lips and she used her thumb to wipe it up, then sucked the sugar off swiftly and grinned at me; she was sweet to me like jam and I always thought the sun reflecting on the creek water onto my father made him beautiful.

You were both naked because no one would come to the creek at night. You kissed up her breasts and clavicles, stopping to notice a few small red bumps on her shoulders. They were on her wrists and ankles too and she said *damn mosquitoes keep getting me this summer* when you asked her about them. You thought about how mosquitoes were vampires lusting for blood and the bumps they left were like the shiny red jewels inside of pomegranates and how pomegranate juice was sweet and dark and stained your lips and teeth like blood. Pomegranates were thought to have 613 seeds, one for each of the Bible's commandments and symbolized fertility and prosperity and this girl draped in holy, shiny rubies violently undulating was the epitome of sanctity; you thought that if you dug deep enough with your incisors, you'd find the largest red jewel of all in the shape of a womb and she'd invite you to drain her body until she was just a suit of skin and you'd get rich off of the 613 succulent seeds that she left. In reality, you knew that you wouldn't taste her iron or plasma and your teeth would only leave a red mark dotting her burnt, milky skin. Humans leave hickies (bruises), not blood marks and it saddened you because you wanted to be a vampire for once, to be the fearful figure in the dark and incite terror, pleasure, lust in this girl who willingly gave you her body full of blood and organs.

You had married your wife in the middle of July and your wedding was hot and unenjoyable. This summer, years later, she wanted to go to dinner for your anniversary so you took the night off from work and took her to an Italian restaurant not far from your house. She put on a nice

blouse (low-cut) that made you see her body again. She straightened her dirty-blonde hair and put on lip gloss. Across the white tablecloth, you remembered how beautiful she was, how successful she was in her career, how ambitious and caring she actually was. You used to never get tired of making love to her, but the linen and missionary and lights-off eventually rusted your desire for her. As you drove home with her, she took your hand in hers and softly stroked it and her touch made you tingle; she dimmed the lights in the bedroom before she wrapped her legs around your hips, pulling you into her. Her body was a straight line, starting to wrinkle with age, so you kissed her with eyes closed so tight that it hurt, just to see rollerblades and young skin behind your eyelids.

She liked to go to the creek despite the vampires (mosquitoes) and she liked to make love under the moonlight, under the stars because they didn't judge, and even if they did, they were too far away to burn her. She always brought her rollerblades because she had you drop her off at the bar. You had offered to drive her home, but she didn't want you to know where she lived. She was probably a little ashamed that she was sleeping with you, that she spent her nights moaning into an older man's ear but she also probably liked the recklessness, the rebellion that the stars shone on, the revolution of having you inside of her and the power she gained from the submission. It wasn't love, but it was sweet, tender, and glutinous, and that was fine because you were married and she had her whole life ahead of her so this summer was all about sweltry.

In the cidery light that the sunset cast on her and her rollerblades, her curves looked immaculately sculpted. She was smooth and her waist arched before her hips like a pear. An

artist must have shaped her, taking her heavenly flesh and pushing and pulling, kneading until she was the farthest thing from a straight line; she was bumps of heavenly meat crafted into folds of desirous skin and her nudity was dripping down her legs and as you ran your fingers along her buttery, smooth curves, you knew why you wanted her. You liked to kiss her hips before taking a tapered knife and sleekly slicing into them; liked to take the even slivers and suck the soft flesh and skin until it disintegrated on your tongue; liked to let the juices spill from your lips. *You love my hips, don't you?* She asked and you looked up at her and then back down at the birthing bones you were suckling on. They were still smooth and sculpted, but now red and darkening.

When you were eight or nine or ten, your father took you to the butcher shop where he worked because your mother had to go to a wine convention and couldn't take care of you. The summer had scorched the pavement and made the air stale, so the gusts of cold when you entered the butcher shop was welcomed; yet, the scent of frozen meat made you uneasy. The front of the shop had cuts of fresh, red flesh sitting in glass, ready to be wrapped in thick paper and tied with twine. A young girl worked the counter, her name didn't matter, but she was pretty and youthful and her body was toned and her hair was shiny and her smile was vibrant. She made sure to greet you, only briefly, before switching her attention to your father. He told you to stay out in the front, that it wouldn't get busy this early in the day, so you could man the counter. You sat on a tall wooden stool behind the cash register and the young, pretty girl didn't show you how to do anything but instead went through the back door to where the meat was cut. An old woman shuffled through the door and the bell chimed but the young, pretty girl didn't come back out to help her. The back smelled of rot and blood and veins (drained) and the big knives that your

father used were laying on the table unattended. You held your nose to keep the meat out and pushed through the door that led to the freezer; the frost blanketed the scent, but carcasses of turkey and lamb hung from hooks and you had to maneuver around them. You found your father and the young, pretty girl behind a large frozen, gutted pig and his lips were on hers and her hand was on his groin and they both moaned and giggled, clearly not in love, but you still wanted to take the knife from the other room and cut her hand off at the wrist and gut her, hang her from a hook and sell her cutlets to the old lady outside; instead, you walked out of the freezer and yelled for your father and he came out with only a hint of guilt on his face. That night, your mother brought Chinese home for dinner because she was too tired to cook and you noticed how small, how bite-sized, the pieces of seared beef and chicken were as your father shoveled them in his mouth with a fork.

You liked the car sex and creek but you wanted to move to a bed, so you bought a motel room for the sunset rendezvous. After you made love to her for the first time at the motel, you asked how old she really was. She avoided your gaze and she asked your age instead. You told her that you were thirty-five and her shoulders slumped and she seemed to decompose in front of you. She fell into herself, began to cry, sobs erupting from her shoulders (guilt). You held her, assured her that it didn't matter that she was so young, that you loved to be with her and be inside of her and to kiss her and that she was the sweetest girl you'd ever met.

You ordered take-out that night in the motel because you didn't want to take her out to a nice dinner where she could be seen. You ate with legs crossed on the dingy floor of the room; she

used a fork because she didn't know how to use chopsticks but you used chopsticks because your mother taught you how. After you finished, she took out a Tupperware from her backpack and pulled out a handful of ruby red cherries. She said that she loved cherries and that they were her favorite fruit, asked you if you liked them and you said you didn't mind them and she sucked the bloody flesh from the stem and playfully spat the small pit at you. You imagined her, pulsing heat and little orbs of rare meat and you just wanted to take all of her in your saliva-gushing mouth and chomp harder and faster and deeper until cherry juice sprayed all around the room, painted the beige walls a gooey red. She must have loved them because they're easier to pop into her mouth, harder to choke on and you loved the stained teeth (incisors). *Guess what I can do? I can tie the stems into a knot with my tongue* she told you and she plucked one green stem from the red and wiggled it around in her cheeks. She presented the thin little bow tie on the tip of her tongue like a gift and you wanted to grab it, elongate the elastic stem and wrap it around her neck, underneath her white collar (bones) and pull it tight, taut, terse. That stem was bloody but it was mostly cherry guts and she was on her hands and knees when you entered her from behind, pulling her hair tightly, wrapping your forearm around her neck because she liked to be choked and pounded at the same time. The white linen was splattered red and she was embarrassed because she forgot that she was on her period, that the lust got the better of her; you told her that it was fine and you thought that her guts might be cherries, but more likely just bloody stems tangled up into dishevelment.

Your wife asked you why you weren't making more money if you had been working more night shifts. You didn't think that she was going to notice; she was the person who made more money,

anyways. But she did notice, and you in fact had been making less money, taking some nights off to fuck your lover and pay for motel rooms. You told her that you had to give some money to your brother because he had just lost his job and couldn't pay rent (lie). She raised an eyebrow and implored how you could possibly do that without consulting her first, without letting her know that your family needed help. She offered to reach out to him, to see if he needed anything and you quickly told her not to, that you have it under control and that he doesn't want it to be a big deal. She shrugged, looked angry and bewildered, but let out a sigh (acceptance). You didn't want to talk about it anymore, so you kissed her neck and threw her on the bed and entered her. With her legs in the air, you couldn't help but imagine that her feet had chunky rollerblades with little red wheels and laces. Being inside of your wife didn't feel the same: dry, monotone, a whisper instead of a moan.

You met her at the motel at sunset. When she arrived, you noticed the red latched onto her skin. She'd been skating in the sun all day in her denim shorts. Or she had been skating naked. It was denim or skin and you liked the idea of her getting an even tan; but in that dusky moment, she had cranberry legs. You led her to the small hot tub outside of the room and she dipped those legs in and then she was a Vodka Cranberry, only it tasted like chlorine and red and tart. You could sip on it through a little black straw, salty slurps (soft) but it wouldn't get you drunk; it was too hot for her burned skin, so she retracted her legs from the water.

Back in the motel room, she was horizon-hued and peely, so you went to get some ice, stuck it in a wad of paper towels, and placed it on her throbbing thighs. *Can you get my cranberry juice*

from my bag? She asked and you did it, she drank it, and you saw the tan linen covering her naked breasts and collar bones and torso, lamp casting a short glow with the hot tub moving in subtleties right outside of the sunken patio window and she was all drunken legs. You gently kissed your way up those cranberries, gently moved the linen and there were her bathtubs of dark red juice, clumps of waxy, wild blood clots eager to make your glass of vodka (tongue) just a little bit sweeter. She quivered as your face dove into her pulpy portal and she tasted so lovely that you just wanted to leave her in a scatter, knowing that no matter how deep you or the red was, her rollerblades would still fit afterward and she'd skate into her own skin's horizon while you drove back in the dark.

Every morning before school, you would sit at the kitchen table, eat your sugary cereal, and stare at the huge wooden fruit bowl that sat in the middle. The morning light would pour in on the fruit, sometimes plums or grapes or bananas or apricots or cherries, sometimes perfect or bruised, fresh or old, lush or decaying, ripe or rot; some days, you would hear your mother and father laugh and kiss (ripe), but others you would hear skin on skin, arguments and tears (rot) and your mother would come out looking like she had been sitting inside of that fruit bowl on the counter for days.

At the creek clearing, she pointed out how bright the stars were. You walked with her around the forest and shrubbery but he couldn't stop looking up at the sky. They shone in her mossy eyes and she asked what your mom did for a living and you wanted to say that she bruised; instead, you said that she had worked at a vineyard on the other side of town and that you sometimes

went with her to work as a child and she showed you her work life where she was a retailer, striving to get the best wines to customers. She was good at talking to people, pretending that the red wine that stained her dress also stained her skin (discoloration). You would watch her flirt and swing her dress to show that she was a woman, a sensual creature not defined by how she was butchered every day by a man with knives for fingers. You took this girl and her rollerblades to the house where you grew up because she asked where you had lived; it was an angular ranch, no fence, abandoned and it held victimization and heartache and fruits and love and stains; she offered you a grape from her bag, but you hadn't crushed a grape between your teeth and swallowed that brutal, sweet flesh since you had left that house years ago.

You wanted to fuck her all the time because she enthralled, made your body burst and tingle so you wanted to make her a blackberry, an accumulation of cloudy watercolor bruises on her hands and knees after she fell while skating. In the motel room, you turned the lights off, made her keep her rollerblades on, and took her from behind. You took her wrists, made them blackberries as you held her arms behind her back and you rammed in and out of her. Some say that Christ's blood makes up those little dark orbs and you felt something otherworldly, an injection of light from the vastness of some ether, a power like the voidless sun and you became the blackberry brambles that made up the crown adorning Christ's head and then you became the hair under the brambles and then the skull beneath the hair and then you became Him all at once as you filled her, as you took all of her, as you fucked her. She became sweet like moans, sweet like exhale, tart like purple, tart like hips breaking, sugary like sweat dripping into linen, sugary like chest tightening, ripe like nudity, ripe like screaming, lovely like protest, lovely like blackberry breasts

and wrists and neck. But then she shook you off of her, out of her and crawled to the head of the bed, holding the sheets close to her and she pleaded for you to stop, to just get away from her and you tried to reach a hand (gentle now) out to her but she flinched away. As you got dressed, you saw her cry, dewy drops glistening on blackberries in a dusky glow and you were confused, you pleaded for her to explain herself and she said *why wouldn't you stop when I asked you to? Why would you keep going, why wouldn't you just stop fucking me?* And you told her that she liked it rough and she called you a *sick fuck* and told you to *get out*, so you did but as you left her sobbing, you thought that her bruises might be the most beautiful thing that you had ever witnessed.

Your mother had always loved to cook fresh apple pie, made it an outing for you and your brother to pick the Honeycrisps hanging from the trees near the ranch. She would spend hours diligently, carefully slicing the apples with a little knife that had a bright red handle. She once sobbed while cutting apples and grapes and then bananas and kiwis and then she had no more fruit to dice so you asked her if she wanted you to run outside and find anymore, anything that she could stuff into pie crust and bake into something beautiful. She sobbed more so you just held her from the side, nestling your child face into her belly and she wrapped her arms around your head and pressed her teary cheeks to the top of your skull and cried more and more and more. Your wife had tried to bake an apple pie before, but she cut her finger slicing the granny smiths and burnt the top crust. It was fine because you didn't like to be reminded of your childhood home, but you found yourself wishing the apples tasted more like honey than the sour ones your wife chose at the supermarket.

She came to the bar with her fake ID again and asked to speak to you. You left work early and took her to the creek, the car ride was silent and you tried to rest your fingers on her bare thighs but she flinched away. She walked along that log again, spun on her heels and faced you, water writhing beneath her feet and you stayed on the bank. She told you that she didn't want to see you anymore, that it was a fun time but it had to end because she couldn't bear you hurting her anymore. She begged, her eyes and freckles pleaded for you to understand but you didn't; so, she dipped her hand into the running water and scrubbed at her neck, revealing dark patches splattering her throat underneath layers of makeup. With teary eyes, she said that you had broken her and that she didn't love you and you might have shed a tear; it felt like you had but you weren't sure and it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

Her shoulders were rotten apples, sunken and browning, pits of bone popping out of the crumbling skin. They had been beautiful, honey crisps, plump and bursting with sugar and sex. You had bitten into her collarbones and tasted the tart and sweet of sweat and her heart (pit). You begged her not to leave, but her body was sinking into itself; poked a finger into her eye socket and it was submerged in rubbery, mushy skin but she kept sobbing, spewing sad moans and she just kept saying *no no no stop stop stop never again never again never again* so you drove her back to the bar and she munched on a granny smith apple from her bag because the sour comforted her as tears dripped down her cheeks. She tied her laces and told you that if you approached her, she would have to tell someone and press charges. You couldn't possibly understand how someone so beautiful, so vibrant, could hurt you like that, but she skated away

without another word; only a single glance backward let you know that she was forever wild and you would never be able to find her in a vineyard or meadow or creek again.

She didn't come around the bar anymore, but you never stopped hoping that she would. But your wife was still suspicious and asked if you were having an affair because she had talked to your brother and he hadn't needed any help with money. You gave a slight nod and she sobbed, slapped, screamed, but then calmed down. She made you two go to a couple's therapist and the therapist asked you all of these questions about the affair that you didn't want to answer. You didn't understand why you slept with the girl, or why you hated to be inside of your wife, or why the rollerblades had red wheels or why the therapist kept bringing your mother up. The therapist made you think about your childhood and you sat in that chartreuse velvet sofa and went back in time but all you saw were flashes: serrated knife, the creek, the moss, freezers, young pretty girl's smirk, drained carcasses, fruit bowl; fruit in bowl, beautiful apples plums bananas pears peaches apricots, lovely grapes oranges berries strawberries blackberries marionberries, red fruit, yellow ones, orange ones, purple ones, galaxies that were fruit, sex that was fruit, kisses that were fruit, mother's hands that were fruit, father's fingers that were fruit; pulpy juicy waxy fleshy fruit, bruised bruised bruised please no more purple no more stains those blackberries were rotten those apples were rotten mother was rotten her face was sinewy, melting off of her skull because he drained her from the outside he put her in ice to fix her but she'd never be fixed and why did he fuck that young girl why did he try to put your family into the freezer why did he bruise why did you bruise how could you bruise her; rollerblades red wheels red laces cherry stain red-stained-teeth she was on her period she was so young a child and fucking her was like

running through the wild like swimming in that creek you grew up in like jumping on stars like rocks stuck in the water with the stream rushing over it like being an ant finding a fallen strawberry and devouring the sweet flesh and seeds and you needed to give your seed to her but she kept rollerblading away and was she really that young did she really like vodka did she really have such long red legs? Your wife held you as you sobbed and every heave of breath brought a flash; the therapist asked if you had ever undergone a traumatic experience and you laughed because a fruit bowl couldn't be traumatic, even if it could hold your therapist's accusations, your wife's mundanity, your father's butcher knives and freezers and pretty girls, your mother's shaking fingers and flowing dresses and skin dents, your lover's rollerblades and nakedness and lip gloss and wilderness, your ripe and rot, ripe and rot, ripe and rot...